

THE ROTHSCHILDS.

By Joel Benton.

NO family probably ever lived whose history has been so prominent and romantic as that of the Rothschilds. The original founder of this commercial house, Amschel Moses Rothschild, was born early in the last century in the Judengasse in Frankfort on the Main—a narrow street inclosed with walls, outside of which the Jews were not permitted to reside, and where they were very crowded and very poor. The number of the Rothschild house, which is still standing, was 152. It had three principal stories, with an attic, and, above this again, a large gable peak bursting from the roof. There were two small dormer windows at the sides of this peak, and the whole front of the house was well windowed for the benefit of a multitude of families, of which the Rothschilds were but one.

Amschel Rothschild began to earn his living first as a dealer in old coins and curiosities. A good many anecdotes are told of him as well as of other members of the family, which may be mythical but are no doubt illustrative of the Rothschild traits. It is said of Amschel that while he was strolling on a country road one day in pursuit of his calling, he was overtaken by another peddler better off than himself, who carried his goods on an ass, and who invited him to put his pack on the animal. This Rothschild did, but on coming to a bridge over a deep ravine—the bridge being a single plank—Rothschild at once removed his goods, saying: "Accidents sometimes happen at places like this, and as this sack contains all my fortune it is well to be on the safe side." His comrade thought this was an excess of caution,

but when the ass and his load fell into the ravine from the middle of the bridge, it proved nothing more than reasonable sagacity.

The second Rothschild was Mayer Amschel, who was born in 1743. It was intended by his father that he should be a Rabbi, as several of his relatives had been; but his business instinct was so much stronger than his love for theology that he refused the religious vocation. In college even he began to collect coins, and to prepare for trade. When his education was over he accepted a position with a banking house in Hanover, and rose to be co-manager of it; soon after which circumstance he began business for himself. He was both cautious and bold, and was almost invariably successful in his ventures. His integrity was so great that he was called the "honest Jew." It was he who purchased the house in Frankfort, where the family so long lived, humble as it was, and which subsequent members of the family retained as if it were in some way connected with their prosperity.

Amschel's good fortune came to be greatly advanced by his acquaintance with Baron Von Estorff, who introduced him with high praise to William IX, Landgrave of Hesse. When he met the two nobles together they were playing chess; and His Highness was at the moment of seeing him puzzled to make his next move. Rothschild suggested a play, at His Highness's request. He made it and won the game. As a result of the impression made by this interview Rothschild became Court Banker. In 1804 he contracted for the issue of a large Danish loan; and during Napoleon's attack upon



THE JUDENGASSE, FRANKFORT ON THE MAIN.

Frankfort, which put the Landgrave's fortune of millions of ready money in peril, Rothschild was trusted by his patron with every cent he possessed, without a paper to show for it. His trust was well kept. Later, when the Duke of Wellington wanted funds in Spain, and the English bankers did not dare to risk sending them, Rothschild did the business, and cleared, annually, for eight years for this service, \$600,000. After this skillfully done and difficult task was performed, the Rothschild firm was intrusted with paying enormous subsidies to the continental princes, and henceforth its establishment was the banking house of nations.

Just before Mayer Amschel Rothschild died (September 13, 1812) in his sixty seventh year, he called his five sons to him; and, after giving them his blessing, enjoined them to remain faithful to the law of Moses, to continue united until the end, and to undertake nothing without having first consulted their mother. "Ob-

serve well these three points," said he, "and you will soon be rich among the richest, and the world will belong to you." These five sons were Anselm, Solomon, Nathan, Carl, and James. Anselm took the original house at Frankfort, the others forming branches of it in Vienna, London, Paris, and Naples. This pentarchy was a great idea, and multiplied the Rothschilds' fame and power at once. The rapidity with which their joint fortunes were accumulated was astonishing. It is said of Nathan Rothschild (though all the Rothschilds were benevolent) that he was particularly kind in ministering to human affliction. But when he dropped a coin in a beggar's hand he would hasten off so as not to be known.

Heine says that the old Rothschild, founder of the reigning dynasty, was a noble soul, goodness and kind heartedness itself; a benevolent face with a pointed little beard; on his head a three cornered hat, and his dress quiet and sober, if not poor.

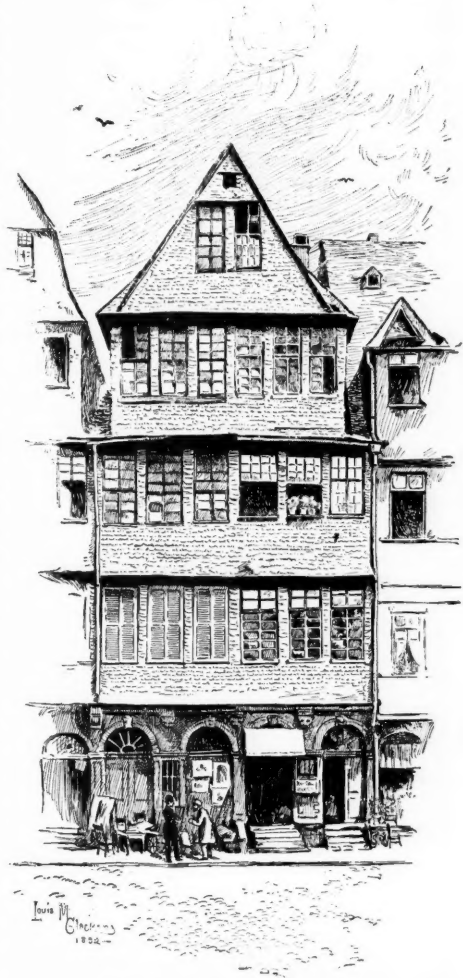
He was often surrounded by poor people in the street, to whom he gave money and advice. To see a row of Frankfort beggars happy was to be sure that Rothschild was in the habit of passing that way.

Among the five brothers there were of course diversities of ability; but Nathan Mayer was by common consent made the chief director in the most important commercial transactions. Under his leadership the firm greatly expanded its business, parts of which were issuing state loans and the remission of government funds. They now often controlled the issue of war or peace in Europe. Ferdinand I of the Kingdom of the Two Sicilies was compelled to accept as Prime Minister a man they had named before he could obtain their aid, nor was this the only case of a similar control on their part. Between 1815 and 1830 they loaned to five great European states one thousand million thalers. In the former year they received from Austria hereditary titles of nobility, and various titular honors from other nations. On memorable occasions of financial distress the Rothschilds have even fortified the Bank of England and other similar institutions. When Disraeli made his great purchase of Suez Canal shares, they advanced the British government four million pounds sterling. Several great industrial and railway schemes have called successfully for their money.

The Neapolitan branch of the firm was closed in 1855, and in 1868 the last surviving one of the five brothers died, leaving at the head of the four remaining branches descendants of these brothers. Their system of agents and couriers, together with their own multiple nationality, always gave them early possession of desirable news at all points, as in the case where they brought to England news of the battle of Waterloo before the government's own agents knew of

Napoleon's downfall. One instance of the power of the firm was the guarantee given by Baron Lionel to the German government at the end of the Franco-German war, "to maintain the stability of the foreign exchanges," which made easier the payment of the French indemnity.

The Rothschilds now own large estates in Austria, England, Germany and France. Endless are the stories told of the different members of the family, though not a few are either embellished or imaginary. It is said that the Vienna brother



THE OLD ROTHSCHILD HOUSE.



NATHAN MAYER ROTHSCHILD.

once, having occasion to hire a cab, paid the cabman the regular fee, whereupon the cabman said with a disappointed look; "Why, your son always pays me double price." "But," said Rothschild, "he can afford to. He has a rich father, and I have not." This anecdote, however, has done good service since, in an application of it to the Vanderbilts and the Astors. It is also said that a poor fellow one day met one of the Rothschilds, and pleaded with him thus: "Mr. Rothschild, I am your cousin through Adam, and I am poor while you are rich. Please give me some money." Rothschild at once gave him a small coin, and said: "Certainly I will. If all your relations by Adam give you as much you will be a richer man than I am."

Combinations of bankers have often tried to go into the market

and antagonize the Rothschilds, rarely or never with success, or at least not without receiving afterwards a primitive *quid pro quo*. Baron Lionel in England, and James in Paris, were especially bright financiers. The money getting instinct was in their blood; but some of the present younger members of the family do not live for money simply, but enjoy their wealth and entertain with a hospitality that only kings and millionaires can afford.

The stormy history of Europe during the eighteenth century, if it did not directly give this family financial power, gave them the opportunity to exploit their genius. Modern conditions of finance and exchange have leveled to some extent their former ascendancy; and it may be long before another such family of financiers will again arise.

